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SUBJECT: NGO GOLOS PREPARES TO OBSERVE DUMA ELECTIONS

REF: MOSCOW 5338

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The NGO Golos is preparing to observe the Duma elections on December 2, and has begun monitoring pre-election activities. Golos has already run into legal trouble in one region, and while its leaders are unaware of any other impending legal action, they remain potentially vulnerable because of the sensitive political environment, their rationale for observing elections, and the organization's legal structure. Golos is also subject to charges that it is a tool of Western governments, because almost 90 percent of its budget comes from USAID and because it is increasingly identified with marginalized parties. Nevertheless, Golos remains the only credible Russian NGO capable of nationwide election day monitoring. End Summary.

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Plans to Observe the Elections  
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¶12. (C) Russia's electoral law allows only accredited journalists and members of political parties to observe elections inside polling stations. Lyudmila Alekseyeva of Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG) noted that because of the new law, MHG would be unable to observe elections this year as it had done since 2000. Golos is preparing to have 3,000 monitors in polling stations around the country on election day, and has established a toll-free telephone number for citizens to report election law violations. Golos considers its 3,000 observers as journalists for the quarterly eight-page newsletter, "Citizens' Voice." While this claim has not been legally tested, Shibanova is confident that these journalist credentials would hold up in court.

¶13. (C) Golos Director Liliya Shibanova said that Golos's 80 long-term observers have already noted violations of electoral law throughout the country, and that the Golos hotline has been receiving calls from citizens across the country. "There are already enough violations to question the legitimacy of the elections," she argued, citing examples of abuse of administrative resources, and pressure on employees from state enterprises such as hospitals and universities. On December 2-3, Golos will run a public information center to send out news on the elections.

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Golos is Actually Two NGOs  
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¶14. (C) Shibanova explained to us that there are two registered NGOs named Golos: "Association Golos" and "Regional Civic Organization Golos." Association Golos was established in 2000 and is the publisher-of-record for the quarterly newsletter, "Citizens' Voice." Association Golos persists as a legal entity, but ended its operations in May 2007, dismissed its staff (who were promptly hired by RCO

Golos), and has no operating funds or a budget. Association Golos is kept legally alive because it remains the owner of the Golos newspaper "Citizens' Voice." Regional Civic Organization Golos (RCO Golos) is the funded organization that maintains an office and staff, operates the voter complaint hotline, coordinates the activities of the 40 regional offices, and actually prints and distributes the newsletter.

¶ 15. (C) RCO Golos was established to improve and decentralize its operations, as well as to escape the threat of potentially crippling tax liabilities. Association Golos had received grants from foreign sources such as USAID, NED, NDI, and the Mott Foundation. In standard requests to the GOR's Commission on International Humanitarian and Technical Assistance, Association Golos applied for an exemption to the "profit tax" on foreign grants. The GOR did not respond to these requests, and Association Golos maintained no reserve funds to pay the taxes if the request was eventually denied.

¶ 16. (C) Golos Deputy Director Grigoriy Melkonyants explained that Association Golos and RCO Golos have a legal agreement for RCO Golos to print and distribute the quarterly newsletter ostensibly written by Association Golos. Each observer-journalist signs an agreement with Association Golos before becoming accredited. Association Golos also has signed a cooperative agreement with each regional branch of RCO Golos. Melkonyants said that Golos legal advisors had assured him that this arrangement was legally sound. Tetyana Bogdanova, a Golos project manager, told us that Golos has provided photo IDs and journalists credentials to each observer, and that all electoral commissions in the 40 regions where Golos is active have been provided with color, notarized copies of the Association-RCO agreements.

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Preparing for Trouble  
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¶ 17. (C) Shibanova described RCO Golos's decentralized organization as less vulnerable to official pressure. For example, when the activities of Golos Povolzhye in Samara were suspended last month (reftel), no other branch of the organization was affected. However, the entire legal justification for the observers as journalists still rests entirely on Association Golos, which remains vulnerable to suspension or closure.

¶ 18. (C) In order to prevent difficulties on election day, Shibanova said that she was seeking a meeting with Central Elections Commissioner Churov and Russian Foundation for Free Elections (RFFE) Executive Director Andrey Przhdomskiy. Przhdomskiy is also the head of the Public Chamber and NGO Coordinating Committee on elections. She will seek assurances from both that the accredited Golos observers will be allowed access to polling stations across the country. She and Transparency International's Yelena Panfilova are planning a November 28 press conference to provide the latest data from their long-term campaign observation efforts and preview their plans for election day.

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Association with the West and Dissenting Voices  
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¶ 19. (C) Golos is frequently associated with the West and with dissenting voices in Russia. Golos presently receives 90 percent of its funding from USAID, and many of the regional branches are run by former members of Yabloko, the Green Party, or members of "Other Russia." Golos has a voter hotline webpage named after its toll-free telephone hotline ([www.8800333350.ru](http://www.8800333350.ru)), and welcomes other organizations and parties to put this link on their webpages. To date, only Yabloko and SPS websites carry the link, further establishing

the perception of Golos as a voice of dissent, not impartiality.

¶10. (C) In Chelyabinsk, Golos is facing competition from a pro-government NGO "Committee of Voters" (COV) which is critical of Golos and its affiliation with the West. Shibanova said that there was a PR campaign against Golos organized by the COV, and that the Chelyabinsk electoral commission has decided to work only with the COV. Shibanova knew of no other regions where a local pro-government electoral observer NGO had been formed.

¶11. (C) On November 25 on national television, a 45-minute documentary by Arkadiy Mamontov mixed excerpts of his "Velvet.ru" expose of Western support for colored revolutions with footage of the Other Russia demonstrations on Saturday and Sunday (septel). The documentary featured a segment on NDI training for Golos monitors, and cited USAID support of \$20 million, \$4 million of which it claimed illegally went to Russian political parties.

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Comment  
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¶12. (C) Golos is increasingly perceived as an opponent to the government, and more often finds itself on the side of opposition political parties instead of being perceived as a non-partisan watchdog. The strongest press statements on their website are directed at the government, not at political parties. We believe that Golos is vulnerable to legal action aimed at its organizational structure, and the possibility remains that Golos journalists could be challenged on election day by a finding that its newsletter is not a real publication, and its observers, therefore, not real journalists. The Embassy continues to reiterate the importance of Golos maintaining the highest commitment to non-partisan practice and public image.

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